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A ROCK 'N' ROLL LIFE

Zappa had ferocious dark brown eyes; his laugh was a sarcastic sneer.

B3

Only problem was, nobody was writing about it

Brian Jones — pale, bags under his eyes, in natty Italian tweed trousers, black turtleneck and two-tone canvas-and-leather shoes — silently passed a large comb through his blond bouffant in front of a mirror, interrupting his concentration to curse a bellhop over his drink order: "When I say double, I mean double!" Bitch.

I clipped The Gazette's coverage of their airport press conference: Asked about the average age of their fans, Jagger said, 'About 3½, but I don't really know. We try to educate them from the cradle to the grave.' A week later, Jagger and Richards had written (I Can't Get No) Satisfaction.

Little did I know that four years later, the Stones would provide me with my big break in becoming a rock critic — a species that did not yet exist.

You couldn't ask for a more extreme pair of opposites than Frank Zappa and Jesse Winchester, who in 1967 played huge roles in my musical education and, it turned out, my so-called career.

LSD and Afghan hash had hit town and most everyone was dropping out, turning on, tuning in — except me, fearing drugs would bust my brain. (A year later, a professor, aptly named Malcolm Stone, got me stoned on Afghan hash. He put my head between earphones, turned on the Doors' second album and said, "You'll never hear things the same way again." Flying high in a friendly sky, I realized: People are strange when you're a stranger. But I digress.)

I was two months shy of 19 when Zappa arrived on Jan. 7 for a two-week gig at the New Penelope coffee house (Sherbrooke at Bleury). Hanging out, I was the gofer for owner Gary Eisenkraft, a tall ex-folkie with a goofy laugh who wore granny glasses and a mod three-piece suit; I also designed the Penelope's posters and flyers. Thus I accompanied Zappa to the nearby Banque Nationale to vouch for him after tellers, frightened by his extreme mien — unruly black hair falling over an ankle-length raccoon coat — refused to cash his paycheques. On the basis of the Mothers of Invention's debut album, the double-disc Freak Out!, Zappa was my hero. While he had a reputation for fearsome put-downs, the ice crystals that formed on his moustache seemed to make him merely mortal.

"It was 20 degrees below zero," he recalled in a 1993 Playboy interview. "We walked from our hotel to the club, and the snot had literally frozen in our noses by the time we got to work. The wind instruments got so cold that if you tried to play them, your lips and fingers would freeze to them. The instruments couldn't even be played until they were warmed up. It was pretty primitive. If we hadn't experienced that, we probably wouldn't have come up with some of the more deranged types of audience participation and audience punishment things we were doing at the time.

"The question became, how far would they go?" Zappa said, regarding the fans at his shows in those days. "What could we get the audience to do? The answer seemed to be anything. ... So long as the person telling them to do it was onstage, they would do it."

This degenerate Dada act included band members throwing stuff (food, rubber chickens) at each other and the audience, lasciviously pawing an inflatable doll and getting creative with a can of Cool Whip. All the while, Zappa conducted the Mothers with swift, assured arm-waving and sudden stabs of a finger — classicism perversely run amok, free-form absurdities never before seen in rock.

Frank Zappa, front row, second from right, with the Mothers of Invention in January 1970. Juan Rodriguez was 18 when Zappa and his group played a two-week gig in 1967 at the New Penelope coffee house. An intimidating figure, the bandleader nonetheless revealed a fatherly side in Rodriguez's company.

MONTREAL STAR COLLECTION

Coming up in Juan Rodriguez's Rock 'n' Roll Life

From next week to March 2, look for instalments of this series in Saturday's Culture section and related content on our website and mobile apps. Playlists (website only), videos and other features will be posted each week at **montrealgazette.com/rocknroll**.

Jan. 26: The unlikely interview that kick-started a career.

Feb. 2: In a blur of assignments, Janis Joplin and James Brown stood out.

Feb. 9: On the receiving end of Leonard Cohen's love and hate; deflating Bruce Springsteen's hype; an education in authenticity at the Esquire Show Bar.

Feb. 16: A close encounter with Pink Floyd's fans; a prime seat at The Last Waltz; Paul Anka does it his way.

Feb. 23: At home chez nous; Neil Young soundtracks the critic's fade into the black.

March 2: A good cause doesn't always make for good songs; back on the wagon with the Grateful Dead; Kent Nagano provides an entry to the classical world; a return to Montreal, and to a love of popular music.

Leonard Cohen offered words of rage and hope.

PHOTOS: FROM GAZETTE FILES

An assignment involving Neil Young was a low point.

MAC JUSTER/MONTREAL STAR COLLECTION

Juan Rodriguez's first performance review was of a 1968 show by Jesse Winchester (pictured in Montreal circa 1970), whose shy demeanour didn't mask his vivid songwriting.

Many of their songs were brand new, composed for the upcoming album Absolutely Free: Call Any Vegetable, The Duke of Prunes, Brown Shoes Don't Make It and, of course, Plastic People, which became an anthem the following year in Czechoslovakia's anti-Communist spring thaw: "Take a day and walk around / Watch the Nazis run your town / Then go home and check yourself / You think we're singing 'bout someone else." Our jaws dropped, eyes locked in a fascinated gaze, wondering what was next.

Zappa had ferocious dark brown eyes; his laugh was a sarcastic sneer. He wore construction boots and marched like a man on a mission. As for me, maybe it was my sycophantic earnestness — or my cheque-cashing cachet — that revealed Zappa's fatherly side. (His wife, Gail, also in town, was months away from giving birth to their first child, Moon Unit.) He indulged me, taking the time to explain Where It Was At.

He invited me to late-morning breakfasts — with keyboardist Don Preston and saxophonist Bunk Gardner — at the nearby Swiss Hut, a log-cabin-style joint favoured by separatists, lefties, country music fans, bikers, poets, painters, McGill students, lost and searching souls, dealers, freaks, journalists and gadflies. Zappa and mates mustered laughs comparing their oily ham and eggs to plastic Warhol pop art, I lapsed with rapt attention as they spritzed cultural eclecticism — about Igor Stravinsky and Edgard Varèse (the French-American inventor of organized noise in the 1920s, quoted by Zappa on his album cover: "The present-day composer refuses to die"); about how Freak Out! was the first underground record sold in Los Angeles supermarkets ("right near the checkout"); about outlasting the Beatles ("In two years, we'll be as big as them"); about how damned cold it was and how they wished they were back in L.A.

When I summoned the nerve to show Zappa some college-paper clippings, he said, "Keep up the good work." Made my day — well, maybe my life.

When I summoned the nerve to show Zappa some college-paper clippings, he dutifully said, "Keep up the good work." Made my day — well, maybe my life. I've remained an unrepentant Zappaphile ever since, despite the so-called arrogant sneer that rubbed rock critics the wrong way. Then again, he uttered a line that lives in infamy: "Most rock journalism is people who can't write interviewing people who can't talk for people who can't read." Ouch.

Jesse Winchester came across as a quiet anti-star. He was an oasis of good music, sensitively singing his own songs and a reservoir of standards, accompanying himself on a slightly jazzy guitar. Born in Louisiana, son of a military man, raised in Memphis, he received his draft notice and split for Montreal, where he played in French-Canadian bar bands (not understanding a word) through his first winter in the bitterly cold hinterlands, finally striking out on his own, tenuously, at the Penelope.

Winchester was hesitant, thoughtful, both driven and comforted by a staunch regard for tradition. He was shy, scared, trembled on stage ("treading on thin ice" was the way he put it). His haunting, elegiac songs, recalling Americana — loving it, leaving it — were to be savoured like fine wine: Yankee Lady, Brand New Tennessee Waltz, Biloxi. He painted vivid yet understated scenes — you could "see" his songs — with minimal fuss. He had an innate way with love songs — affection, not lust; classic beauty, not pop art. He delivered them resolutely (including a yearning rendition of Chuck Berry's Memphis).

We got to know each other in a halting kind of way. So it came to pass that Winchester's first write-up in his adopted land was the first performance review I penned, freelance for The Gazette in 1968. Two years later, upon the release of his debut album (produced by Robbie Robertson of the Band), I interviewed him for Rolling Stone; that same year, he opened for the Band at Place des Arts. I designed the cover and wrote liner notes for his lo-fi follow-up, Third Down, 110 to Go.

His songs were instant classics, covered by many. When Jimmy Carter offered amnesty to draft evaders in 1977, Winchester paid a visit — but returned to Montreal. After all, where else could he effectively sing his paean to "that four-letter word," Snow?

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